SOCIAL MEDIA AS STUDENT LANGUAGE LEARNING ENHANCERS

Mihaela ARSENE
Academia de Studii Economice, Bucureşti

Abstract

The paper will survey the foremost social media in terms of their class enrichment potential. The ways in which Internet-based teaching and learning can enhance student intake will be explored in conjunction with an original Internet-based project piloted this year with freshmen at the Academy of Business Studies in Bucharest. Considerations on the effectiveness of the informal learning facilitated by social media and its impact on lifelong learning will round up this experimental approach.

Key words: social media, learning enhancers, informal learning, enriched learning environment, experimental approach

Rationale

In young adult contexts, social media appear to enjoy pre-eminence [1], in this country as well. The language classroom is no exception. Consequently, harnessing social media for enriching the language learning experience available in the language classroom, increase college students' motivation and facilitate their autonomous work appears to be a highly productive approach.

The rationale of this approach lies in the college students' heavy dependence on social media for both information and support, as well as the limited class time available to professors and students alike for materializing a very ambitious curriculum. In addition, the proficiency characteristics and expectations of the target audience – that is the students' upper intermediate proficiency level and their expectations of a state of the art learning input – gear this paper towards a close look at social media and their pedagogical potential.

I will first survey the unprecedented development of social media and its ever accelerated pace; then a close up on social media will reveal their unique features and exceptional value for furthering informal, thereby life-long, learning as well as learner independence; I will ultimately visit the literature in the field for adequate theoretical underpinnings. The final part of the paper will highlight some practical applications that I developed while exploring the pedagogical value of social media, alongside their benefits, providing a dual perspective: the students' perception of the learning benefits and the teacher's one.

A word of caution: this is just the early stage of a long-term exploratory approach to social media as enhancers of the language classroom through independent study activities developed around a number of social software. As a result, the findings reported in this paper need to be taken as preliminary conclusions. In line with the scientific method, they are the result of observation, reasoning and experimentation, with the specific goal of developing some applied research that can improve the language learning process for college students by means of classroom observation and reasoning as conducted by a reflective professional, research of the literature, and ultimately classroom experimentation through hypothesis formulation and design of the research project. The findings are based on observable facts, as revealed by student work and feedback, thus relying massively on the empirical approach.

The age of digital distractions or digital enhancement?

The digital generation does not read as much as we did, they want visual information, they want information that is quick to process, they want instant gratification. These are common perceptions, well documented by social research on generation Y and Millennials [1]. Students in this group appear to have a psychological profile significantly different from other generations. But if they choose to spend hours using social media every week, then educators need to take this into account when planning effective learning activities.

Good teaching involves connecting with the students. What better ways for educators to accomplish this then by changing the paradigm: from the age of digital distraction to the age of digital enhancement. This would be a productive response on behalf of the academia to students' involvement with social media, and would make effective use of these media as facilitators of learning, granting them major applicability to the language curriculum.

The age of digital support to learning is enriching the students' learning experience and posing new challenges to educators. The topic is high on academics' agenda and a quick survey of the literature in the field shows international Ph. D. dissertations focussing on the topic as early as 2006 [1] and a flurry of research activity on the topic this year. To illustrate this, I will mention just a few articles that I found particularly useful for my own research: 'Professors and social media' published in *Inside Higher Education* in May 2010 [10]; 'Higher Education Migrates to YouTube and Social Networks' posted on www.eddigest.com in March 2010 [5]; 'Literary Learning in the Hyperdigital Age' carried by *The Futurist* in its January-February issue this year.

Social media: a pedagogical close up

In what follows I will highlight two of the social media that were relevant to the original project I developed for enhancing students' learning through autonomous work facilitated by social networking tools. This section will therefore focus on YouTube and Wikipedia.

The common denominator of both social media under discussion is the Internet as unique carrier. At this point social media is ranked as the number 1 activity on the Web, having overtaken pornography [11]. In addition, both YouTube and Wikipedia rely on user-generated content – with collective intelligence underlying both media - and the users collaborate in editing, improving and validating the information, thus accounting for the social dimension that is the hallmark of both media. Furthermore, they are both free, self-organized and regulated, thereby fully democratic.

YouTube

According to [11] and [9] the websites currently enjoying the highest numbers of visitors are Google, Facebook and YouTube. YouTube is a California-based video-sharing website, the second largest search engine in the world. YouTube was officially launched in November 2005 to allow users to upload, share and view user-generated video content. 8 months later the site was receiving over 100 million video views per day and more than 65,000 videos were uploaded daily. Every five minutes more than 100 hours of video material are uploaded to the site and over

75% of the materials come from outside the USA. Most of the content has been generated and uploaded by individuals, not by corporations.

Unregistered users can watch videos while registered users are given access to uploading an unlimited number of materials. Video uploads are limited to 10 minutes and a file size of 2 GB. The site accepts a wide range of formats and supports 3G which allows users to upload videos from their mobile phones. As a result, YouTube is perceived [8] as a "Speakers'Corner" in which everybody can have a voice, thereby embodying and promoting democracy.

To further wide access and equal opportunity, in March this year the website started piloting automatic captioning so as to make it more accessible to hearing impaired viewers.

Moreover, the huge range of topics covered by the materials available at this website is making a significant impact on the Internet culture, turning video sharing into one of its major components. Not surprisingly, in May 2010 YouTube was reported to serve more than 2 billion viewers a day. To put this figure in perspective, it suffices to state that the figure is "nearly double the prime-time audience of all three major US television networks combined" [11].

Wikipedia

Another California initiative, Wikipedia was started in 2001. Currently the San Diego-based server hosts over 3,300,000 articles in English and versions in over 200 languages (3), the Romanian one boasting over 100,000 articles.

Relying on a large contributor base consisting mostly of amateurs, Wikipedia is the product of "open and transparent consensus" [7] by means of which the articles tend to display a neutral point of view in the presentation of comprehensive, verifiable knowledge. The collaborative on-going editing accounts for the high degree of accuracy Wikipedia is noteworthy for. According to an investigation reported in the journal *Nature* in 2005 the scientific articles in the Wikipedia show a similar level of accuracy as Encyclopædia Britannica and have a similar rate of "serious errors", too [6].

Just like YouTube, Wikipedia has the potential for extensive and rapid growth. By harnessing the work of millions of contributors, Wikipedia now stands as the world's largest knowledge-based site, resulting in more than ten million articles written in less than nine years, across more than 200 different language versions.

The contributors' individual limitations and poor editorship are commonly made up for by subsequent editors and the scale of involvement ultimately generates the neutrality and comprehensiveness that make Wikipedia a good starting place for a search, in the sense that it provides the terminology, key names in the field, and a feel for the subject. Just what most college students will require for a start.

Social media as learning enhancers

At this point we need to ask ourselves what type of learning can benefit from the use of social media. This question invites a discussion of key concepts like informal learning and the life-long learning approach, together with learner independence which is pivotal to both. The "lifelong learner" segment, also known as the intellectually curious on-going learners [1], can obviously benefit from the Internet-based social networking tools as they could facilitate their easy access to free life-enriching content. The college student segment could also benefit extensively by enhancing their classroom instruction and their research for academic assignments and projects. We are witnessing a movement that "acknowledges learning can occur any place at any time and in unlikely forms" [1] and the use of social networks as learning tools is part of this. In this way the Web is likely to further academic development to become "a force of empowerment" [2], for our students included.

Little surprise that a May 2010 survey of 939 professors at higher education institutions in the USA revealed that 52% use at least one of the social media as a teaching tool [10]. Although the tools are new and the pedagogical uses of different social networks are beginning to emerge, the study conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group, in conjunction with New Marketing Labs and the publishing giant Pearson indicates that the respondents to the survey found YouTube as most congenial to their teaching objectives. More than 20% of the respondents confirmed using materials from the video sharing community in their courses.

Social media and informal learning

In what follows I will highlight social media as collective learning networks that can facilitate informal learning and illustrate this by means of the original student language enhancing

project to be presented in the final part of the paper. Informal learning is a seminal concept of lifelong learning and a cornerstone of all adult learning principles. In addition, it is ever more perceived as "a sub-set of the social learning concepts, where the recognition that learning occurs in a social context through interactions with others and subsequent learning is influenced by observing and modeling the patterns of behaviour"[1].

The formal learning activities – with their heavy emphasis on structured and outcome-oriented learning against inherent time constraints – are ideally complemented, supplemented and reinforced by informal learning activities. The latter will emerge whenever "there is a need, motivation and opportunities for learning and where the control of learning is primarily the responsibility of the learner", according to Marsick and Volpe (1999) [1].

A number of situations are perceived as conducive to informal learning: the ones that have most bearing on the student's autonomous activity through projects will necessarily include situations where learning is generated through reflection and action, as an inductive process, where it is not a highly conscious activity and is therefore influenced by chance, and where there is social interaction to sparkle the process since informal learning occurs oftentimes in relation to the learning of others through social interactions. Consequently, the activities that promote informal learning reveal a social dimension, as apparent from the following sample activities: engaging in mentoring and coaching in order to learn from experts; networking for problem solving; joining communities of practice; engage in information distribution; etc. This could take various forms, from activity in virtual collaborative spaces – such as typically asynchronous discussion forums, instant messaging, blogs, etc. – to setting up wikis as class assignments that facilitate group work for co-editing documents and building collaborative projects.

Social learning theories have been around for decades – Bandura's work on "Social Learning Theory" was published as early as 1977 – and they are constantly revisited, revamped and adapted to current isssues: for example Vygotsky's theories of 1978 on the development of knowledge construction were expanded by Wells in 2000 to include learning that is "socially constructed through language and collaboration" [1].

In addition, educators are constantly concerned about increasing the effectiveness of their teaching by increasing student motivation and engagement with the learning content. Students are telling us that they spend a significant amount of time every week using social media and

research findings document it [4]. Then why not choose to "be where the students are" [5] and take advantage of the social media's appeal to students and harness them for enhancing the learning process?

Sample original project harnessing the language learning potential of social networks

The project emerged from the perception that social media can effectively supplement the primary delivery mechanisms in the language classroom, at the same time improving the dynamics of the social dimension, thereby increasing student motivation and enhancing student learning and participation. The project was designed for class enrichment purposes in relation to a textbook unit on cultural identity and intercultural communication and the primary goal was to supplement the text-only unit.

The original project was developed around an 8 min promotional video on Romania produced in 1964 for the British market. The video provided a comprehensive survey of Romanian realities and some historic background, with various degrees of embellishment. The voice over revealed a strong British accent. The learning tasks were designed so as to make multiple viewing sessions and autonomous group work imperative.

Although the tasks reflected the students' proficiency level, challenging activities that provided ample opportunity for stretching them beyond their comfort zone (Krashen's $i + 1$) were embedded. The activity range included tasks involving all four skills. Variety was insured by informative and reflective tasks, complemented by informative and argumentative ones. All activities were broken down into small achievable steps, with examples to illustrate the intended outcome. The overall project outcomes were clearly spelled out.

Overall, the project was intended to further the students' linguistic development by inducing their consistent engagement with the learning material, through a sense of excitement and discovery. The students had full autonomy and responsibility for the project completion and they were invited to act as project managers, thus making the most of the peer support and interaction available.

Pedagogical benefits

The students reacted enthusiastically to the projects and accomplished more than the teacher had anticipated. Some of them went an extra mile and developed additional projects in conjunction with the original one.

According to the informal discussions with the students, this spiral effect was generated by the inspiring content that they found highly relevant and easy to relate to, by the manageable quality of the project springing from comprehensive teacher-generated guidance and support for project completion, and by the diversity of tasks that catered to all language skills in a comprehensive and balanced manner. Solving the tasks required research, so they had the opportunity to read further English texts - usually in the Wikipedia - and the outcomes were diverse and delivered in a variety of forms.

What the students found particularly useful was the self-paced work of every group and the social interactions which helped solidify knowledge. They loved the sense of having control of the project and relished learner autonomy. So once they decided as a group that the tasks required multiple self-imposed viewing sessions, they were able to wholeheartedly engage in the repetitive viewings conducive to project completion.

Their management skills were put to the test as they had full authority in handling the project in a collaborative environment, still with some competitive features. They had to make decisions concerning the design of the research requested for solving the cultural tasks, the management of their resources and the management of the project outcomes. In terms of research design, some groups chose to interview their parents, others invited seasoned adults to watch the video with them and act as resource people in identifying the placed featured in the video and questioning the opinions expressed in it.

Students' critical skills were honed in the process as they had to evaluate the authenticity and credibility of information and data, and to establish if the material was merely informative or argumentative, thereby serving propaganda purposes.

After conducting the project with five student groups, that is approximately 130 students, I consider the approach productive on account of the high level of student autonomy and engagement it generated. The extensive informal learning around the project materialized in linguistic developments that resonated with the formal learning agenda.

Moreover, the social media inspired project turned to be useful also beyond the language curriculum: the video material afforded an in-depth discussion of cultural identity issues, proving instrumental in developing a sense of pride and appreciation of the home culture. The project also served as an effective learning tool for understanding early communism in Romania and for training students to become ambassadors of their national culture in intercultural exchanges.

Conclusions

The small scale experiment built on the use of social media for learning enhancement which makes the object of the present paper shows that social media have the potential to drive the formal learning process towards increased efficiency and to solidify informal learning, thus consolidating lifelong learning abilities through informal approaches. Given the fact that learning is socially constructed through language and collaboration, it emerges that the social software exemplified by YouTube and Wikipedia are ideally qualified to enhance it.

In line with the literature, I feel inclined to state that original pedagogical frameworks inspired by social media can facilitate the development of independent learners, helping them become proficient in informal learning contexts through the use of social software environments.

The Internet has come of age: the web seemed for years to be stuck with cheap entertainment – remember that until the recent advent of the social media, pornography reigned supreme as the number one activity conducted on the web - and now is becoming a force of empowerment and expression.

It is now the educators' mission to see the opportunities ahead and re-appraise the social media in terms of their pedagogical potential so as to design learning activities that create an enriched social learning milieu.

Bibliography

1. Bartlett-Bragg, A., 2006, *Reflections on pedagogy: Reframing practice to foster informal learning with social software*, PhD thesis submitted to the University of Technology/Faculty of Education, Sydney. Accessed on www.eddigest.comhttp://digitaldialogues.blogs.com/learning_technologies/ in March 2010

2. Bauerlein, M., 2010, 'Literary Learning in the Hyperdigital Age' in *The Futurist*, January-February 2010, accessible at www.wfs.org

3. Baumgartner, P., 2004, 'The Zen Art of Teaching – Communication and Interactions in eEducation', in *International Workshop ICL2004*, Kassel University Press, Villach, Austria, accessed in January 2010 at http://www.elearningeuropa.info/extras.pdf/zenartofteaching.pdf

4. Blackall, L., 2005, 'Digital literacy: how it affects teaching practices and networked learning futures – a proposal for action research' in *The Knowledge Tree*, Edition 7, October. Available online at http://knowledgetree.flexiblelearning.net.au/edition07/download/c_blackall.pdf

5. Gilroy, M., 2005, 'Higher Education Migrates to YouTube and Social Networks' in *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*, 19 (September 2009), pp 12-14

6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reliability_of_Wikipedia last accessed on June 4 2010

7. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About last visited on June 3 2010

8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube accessed on June 4 2010

9. http://www.socialnomics.com/ accessed in May 2010

10. Kolowich, S., 2010, 'Professors and Social Media' in *Inside Higher Education*, at www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/news/2010/05/04/socialmedia

11. Qualman, E., 2009, "Social Media Revolution" video available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lFZ0z5Fm-Ng&feature=fvst

accessible on June 5 2010.

Mihaela Arsene has the makings of an international educator: with a Master of Education awarded by University of Manchester (British Council grant), an MA in International and Multicultural Education from University of San Francisco (Fulbright grant) and a PhD from University of Bucharest, she has developed an in-depth appreciation of higher education models in the US and the EU, together with an interest in the cross-fertilization they afford.